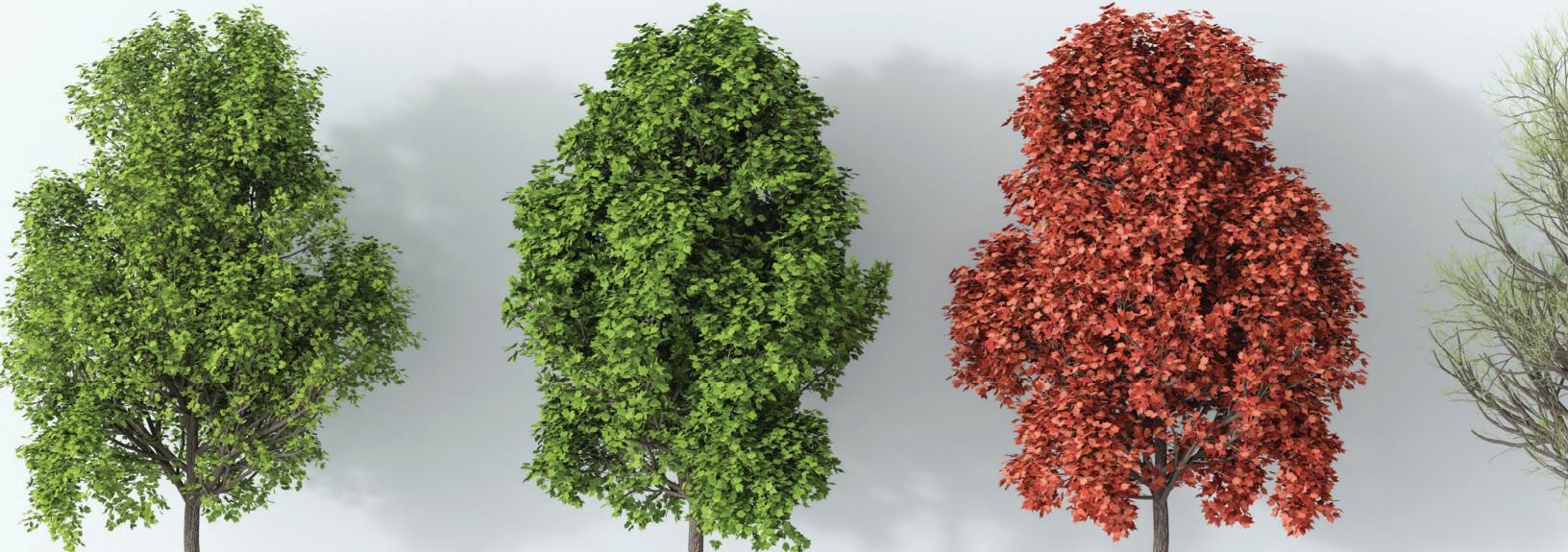


The More Things *Change...*



By Michael T. Buell, FSMPS, Assoc. DBIA

Over the years, I've seen many folks in the A/E/C industries try to come up with new ways to win work, win clients, and fortify their brand in their respective marketplaces. Almost every time I hear or see these evolutionary methods, I notice the same misguided focus. I'm referring to the purely internal or outgoing (our perspective), as opposed to external or incoming (the client's perspective).

Especially during the ridiculousness of the last almost two years, I kept seeing people think that client needs and goals have drastically changed. Yes, schedules change, budgets change, priorities change, and decision-makers change. What has never changed, however, is what clients consistently need, want, and appreciate from their design and construction partners.

Personal success and firm success are both powerful drivers for sure. But without the ability and desire to help bring forth client success, it won't happen ... or at least not in a consistent or sustainable way.

Leveling Up: Five Firm Levels

You have a great opportunity every day to help fortify a client focus for yourself and for your firm. You can start by reaching out to five to 10 of your best client contacts every Monday just to ask "Hey, is there anything in particular I can do for you this week?" Believe me, if you're genuine and responsive, this simple gesture will do wonders.

For added homework, read my last two Marketer articles: "The Entire BD Process in 11 Words" and "How To Earn the Role of Trusted Advisor." * No, I'm not a consultant and I'm not trying to sell anything ... just take a peek and you'll get a new invigoration toward true client relationship development.

All firms in the A/E/C industries can be categorized into one of five levels of true client focus.

Level 1: "Say It and Live It"

Everything these firms do is focused on bringing success to their clients and understanding how that impacts their ultimate success, reputation, and bottom line. They realize that every single communication with a client is an opportunity to build or enhance a stronger level of trust. They consistently fortify the notion that without their clients, they're nothing. Of course, truer words have rarely been spoken in our industries. As well, these firms know that their marketplaces determine their brand, not marketing or branding firms. They ask their clients, "What do you think of when you see our firm's logo or hear about our firm?" Whatever

***Editor's Note:**

Find the author's recent articles on mysmps.org in the October 2019 and April 2020 *Marketer* folder in the Marketing Resource Center library.

University of Colorado Boulder, Business and Engineering Expansion: The Rustandy Building. Haselden Construction, AndersonMasonDale, Canter, Concepts in Millwork, E&K Companies, The Gallego Corporation, K2, S.A. Miro, Inc. © MKM Build Photography, mkmbuild.com.

Story Behind the Picture

This expansion was a complex project in the heart of campus. It required contending with unidentified existing underground utilities; tying into two existing, occupied buildings at different elevations; and a one-story addition on top of an existing building, all while not disturbing occupants. Here we see the new space, which embraced the iconic, beautiful Boulder scenery.



that response is ... is your brand. These firms then take that insight and highlight proven strengths and genuine differentiators.

Level 2: "Say It and Try To Live It"

These firms talk about client focus a lot and certainly try to maintain that commitment, but then managers take over projects and too often function solely around internal issues. This can create a clear distinction between what clients expect (or buy) and what clients get. This is a great reason why business development/marketing and operations should integrate regularly and appreciate each other's roles and talents.

Level 3: "Say It and Don't Live It"

These firms share how client-focused they are ... in proposals and presentations only. Client-focused is nothing but a tagline to them and rarely implemented. These firms feel marketing is simply a way to try to coerce a new client. Clients see through this quickly. There's hope of changing this, but a great reset must happen.

Level 4: "Don't Understand It"

These firms are managed by those who seem to be stuck in the theory that doing good work is all you need to do to grow your firm, be prosperous, and keep your favorite clients. These firms are true commodities in the industries and act like it every day. They understand price, but have little idea what value is, as it relates to their work or relationships.



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Level 5: "Don't Care"

To these firms, which seem to have to change their name every few years, clients are nothing more than a means to an end. In fact, calling them clients is a misnomer ... they're really just customers, and rarely ever come back.

You may be surprised, but all five levels are represented in our industries. I've seen them all and have helped many peers or workshop attendees try to utilize their leadership skills to move their firms up a level or two. Quite frankly, that's the maximum jump any firm can make.

There are plenty of easy ways to get from Level 2 to Level 1 ... but not without senior leadership buy-in:

- Strategy 1: Client Feedback: Always know and care what your clients think about your people and how they feel you can improve
- Strategy 2: Client Communications: Make sure everything you write or say to a client is founded on the understanding or acknowledgement of THEIR perspective before yours
- Strategy 3: Client Commitment: Do what you say you're going to do and ALWAYS be looking for an opportunity to help them!

I've had the opportunity to successfully turn Level 2 firms into Level 1 firms throughout my career. I even got a Level 3 firm to see the light. You'll take your lumps, especially if you don't have full unconditional



The Link, Denver, CO. Haselden Construction, ME Engineers, Royal Textile, SteelWave, and Superior Roofing. © MKM Build Photography, mkmbuild.com.

support from senior management. But once they realize how the next level can quickly and consistently improve their pursuit hit rates, profitability, and reputation, they'll take heed in your advice and allow you every opportunity to advance your career. If they don't ... you're wasting valuable time.

One of the lessons I highlighted in the Level 2 description is an effort that's been appreciated for decades and one which will never change: client commitment. For these firms, we hear their leaders say they're committed to their clients all the time. My guess is that claim is defined in dozens of ways and implemented in just as many.

For 29 years, clients have shared with me that they genuinely love it when they feel their design and construction partners are always looking out for them. This feeling can only come from consistent action. Doing great work is critical, but it's what you're paid to do and should be a given. Client loyalty, which is much more meaningful than client satisfaction, comes from a heck of a lot more than just finishing a project on time and on budget.



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Getting Technical Involved

We business development and marketing professionals engage and work with technical and operational professionals every day. Some days are smooth, and some are challenging. But when our technical friends truly understand the value to them from stronger client relationships, advancement occurs. I've also enthusiastically encouraged my technical colleagues over the years to reach out to at least one client a week only to offer:

- Help with something that's a present challenge to them
- Acknowledgement of their recent accomplishment or promotion
- Information on pertinent industry trends
- Insight on an interesting new technology
- A key takeaway from a recent lesson learned in the field
- A simple yet courteous show of support and concern for their well-being

What many don't realize is that the best business development leaders throughout our industries have great relationships with their top clients because we do these things every single day!

This is why clients return our phone calls; reach out to us for information, support, or our opinion; or accept our invitations to do things away from work (or invite us). This is why clients consider us communication assets and not salespeople. And this is why we don't always have to be the low bid (for those who engage in that battlefield).

The Bottom Line

Whether 25 years ago, 10 years ago, two years ago, or today, our clients don't like being sold to. They don't like being pitched and they don't like being contacted only to be siphoned for information regarding RFPs or future projects.

They do, have always, and will always like being listened to, understood, supported, helped, informed, and appreciated ... just like all of us do! So, remember:

- Work to earn your clients' trust FIRST, then;
- Work to earn your clients' busines, then;
- Work to earn your clients' advocacy

To truly advance your career, ingrain in yourself that client advocacy can ONLY happen in this order. And it can ONLY happen through consistent and client-focused communication, leadership, and accountability.

So as the saying goes ... the more things change, the more they stay the same! ■